Savage Minds Occasional Papers No. 3

The History of the Personality of Anthropology

By Alfred Kroeber

Edited and with an introduction by Alex Golub

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Savage Minds Occasional Papers

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Introduction

Alfred Kroeber is remembered alongside Edward Sapir and Robert Lowie as one of the first generation of anthropologists to train with Franz Boas at Columbia University. He was a key player in the social network of the early Boasians and influenced everyone from Elsie Clews Parsons to Leslie White. He is also regarded as an important early theorist in a generation that distrusted generalization, as well as a formidable ethnography of California Indian life. But beyond these achievements, Kroeber deserves to be remembered for his unique personality, which combined curiosity and enthusiasm with rigor and ambition. I believe that Kroeber's greatest contribution to the discipline was the example he provides for others.

The best way to get a sense of Kroeber's character comes from a story his son Karl once told recounted:

> I recollect an evening around 1950 walking back with my parents to their New York apartment on Claremont Avenue when Alfred and I became intrigued by a long string lying along the sidewalk. This reminded him of how a few years earlier he had gone out with his sister while she walked her little dog. Suddenly they noticed the dog had been chewing at and largely swallowed a ball of string on the sidewalk. "Look," said my father. "I'll hold down what's left here, and you lead Fluffy down the block." Well, it worked—as Fluffy padded along, the string was pulled back out of his mouth. The trouble was, he'd swallowed a lot, and my aunt, not wanting to cross the street unraveling the dog, so to speak, had to turn the corner and lead Fluffy down that block to empty him. So pedestrians coming toward her saw a dog with a string being drawn from its mouth leading back to some mysterious source, while on the avenue other people saw a respectable gentleman with his elegant cane firmly planted on a dirty piece of string mysteriously moving around the corner. "I'm curious," my father said to me, "if this string is as long as that one." So he picked up one end, and I took the other, and as we went down 116th past Broadway, he said, "I'll bet if we stretched this string across Claremont Avenue it would stop some cars." So we did that, between two convenient lampposts—and sure enough it stopped four or five cars. In the apartment house lobby my father chortled every time some law-abiding New Yorker slowed to stop and then laboriously U-turned back. (Kroeber 2003:142)

The episode speaks to Kroeber's sense of humor, but also to much more than that. "The most salient feature of Alfred Kroeber's mind," his Karl writes, was "unflagging curiosity" (Kroeber 2003:147). Others noticed this as well. "the greatest single aspect of his... life was the possession of a completely open mind," remembered Alex Krieger. "It took the form of *constant* seeking of new information, new ideas, and particularly of welcoming criticism" (Krieger 1961:20).

Kroeber "lived as intensely in the present as anyone I've known" Karl (2003:42) remarked, but this was not all. He was an egalitarian person whose curiosity and respect extended to all. Burnham, citing one of Alfred Kroeber's colleagues, notes that "Alsberg characterized Kroeber as a 'good listener,' able "to be objective, to see the other point of view, to penetrate behind another person's behavior to his underlying thought... These traits indicate a sincerity and simplicity of character" (Burnham 2012:15). Krieger agrees: "Kroeber cared nothing about age or standing in the profession, only about what went on in the heads of his listeners... under it all he believed that everyone needed criticism for his own ultimate good" (Krieger 1961:20). Krieger saw in Kroeber "a combination of learning, insight, tolerance for others' views, modesty, and eagerness to be of help to all" (Krieger 1961:23)

Both Kroeber's son and his junior colleague emphasize that although Kroeber's had a "naive curiosity" it was "combined with a highly sophisticated intelligence seeking pleasure in the

systematic organization of dispersed empirical data (the more idiosyncratic the better)" (Kroeber 2003:153). The immediacy, simplicity, and sincerity with which Kroeber lived his life was "not incompatible with rigorous analysis and keen self-reflectiveness" (Kroeber 2003:151). In Kroeber, decency, a fresh eye, and intellectual sophistication existed harmoniously.

Of course, it would be foolish to lionize Kroeber. The death of his first wife caused him endless suffering. He had a hard life in California, where he felt exiled from the rich intellectual life of New York that originally nurtured him. It was difficult for him to come to grips with the reality of the American west and his place in it. "In the wake of the North American frontier," his daughter Ursula writes, "is where my father... did his fieldwork

> among the wrecks of cultures, the ruins of languages, the broken or almost-broken continuities and communities, the shards of an infinite diversity smashed by a monoculture. A postfrontiersman, a white immigrant's son learning Indian cultures and languages in the first half of the twentieth century, he tried to save meaning. To learn and tell the stories that might otherwise be lost. The only means he had to do so was by translating, recording in his foreign language: the language of science, the language of the conqueror. An act of imperialism. An act of human solidarity" (Le Guin 2004:29)

To most readers today, Kroeber will be seen to lack an interest in politics, the need to be critical, which is taken to be central to our discipline. Nevertheless, his curiosity and humaneness deserve to be remembered. As Karl writes,

> Acute and accurate observation is fostered by guilelessness. If we lose a sense of childlike wonder, our native capacity to be surprised—if we lose, that is, the power of responding freely—then what we tell loses persuasiveness, becomes conventionalized, something anybody might report. Since we do grow up, the trick is to direct our accumulating knowledge and experience to subverting personal habits and external coercions that corrode our capacity to be amazed. (Kroeber 2003:151)

This number of the Savage Minds Occasional Paper Series presents an edited version of Kroeber's "A History of the Personality of Anthropology," a piece which Kroeber wrote very late in his life. In it, Kroeber lays down his vision of anthropology's unique outlook. In one striking passage, he describes anthropology as a 'changeling' discipline. Changelings are, in European folklore, elf or fairy children who are brought up by human parents who are unaware of their child's true nature. The child of natural science on the one hand and the humanities on the other, Kroeber sees anthropology as ill at ease in its adopted home of the social science.

This paper is worthwhile because it conveys in a few short pages some of the fundamental instincts of American cultural anthropology. It will be useful for teachers who need a text to use as the basis for a lecture on anthropology's outlook. Of course, the piece itself could also simply be assigned. Anthropologists from other national traditions will benefit from this thumbnail sketch of the American outlook, as will non-anthropologists looking for a nontechnical explanation of how anthropologists look at the world.

Kroeber's paper has been edited for brevity, concision, and clarity. In a few cases I have altered verbs and nouns for agreement when editing the text caused them to disagree. These are indicated with brackets. In the original paper, Kroeber discusses the difference between culture and social structure, and compares his outlook with that of British Social Anthropology and the

'applied anthropology' movement that began during World War II. I have cut these sections in order to focus the essay on Kroeber's vision of anthropology. The original text is open access and readers interested in Kroeber's engagement with these schools of thought are encouraged to read the full text. My goal here has simply been to respect the author's stylistic choices while presenting a slimmed-down version which can be taught in a single session in an undergraduate or graduate theory course.

I hope that this paper, like the others in this series, will help present early anthropological theory in a form that is accessible to everyone. There is today a tremendous amount of material which is open access, but it is difficult to find, inconvenient to read, and many people do not know where to start looking for it. By curating a selection of important open access work, I hope to make open access resources better known and to raise awareness of the actual history of anthropological theory.

-R

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The History of the Personality of Anthropology

By Alfred Kroeber

By personality we mean the totality of the faculties, bent, qualities, and temperament which characterize an individual person. When the term is applied to anthropology, it denotes characteristic activities and propensities. It is thus plain that my title will not allow me to escape the holistic aspects of our chosen branch of science. I will seek to pinpoint the core, but cannot ignore the peripheries; and our peripheries are wide. Yet in spite of much pervasive homogeneity of the personality of anthropology, I must start, paradoxically, with a duality.

When we put anthropology and sociology side by side, it is astonishing how diverse they are in most of what they actually occupy themselves with, and yet how alike they [are] in their general assumptions.

Sociologists and anthropologists deal with sociocultural phenomena autonomously. Sociocultural data rest on biotic and individual psychic factors, of course, and are therefore limited by them; but they are not derivable from them. The analysis of sociocultural phenomena must be made in terms of sociocultural structure and process. This is [the] common doctrine of the two sciences. In view of this sharing of their basic concepts, it is remarkable how sociology and anthropology do not share the areas which they work most actively, do not share the methods by which they work them, or the interests which motivate them.

Most conspicuous is the total neglect by sociology of the fields which constitute the majority of anthropology: biological anthropology, misnamed physical in days when souls were still maintained to be separate from bodies; archeology and prehistory; linguistics; culture history; primitive ethnology; and the folk ethnography of peasantry as it is pursued in Europe. Sociologists use results obtained by us; but they rarely make intrinsic contributions to them.

Now it is notable that with one exception - that of primitive ethnography - all these fields are shared by us anthropologists with nonanthropologists. Biological anthropology is only a fragment of biology, and whether a worker calls himself anthropologist, anatomist, or human geneticist is largely a matter of his job classification. Archeology inevitably runs into art and classic studies. Prehistory merges into full history. Some general linguists have been recruited from anthropology, but more from the various philologies. Culture history has been pursued by historians and geographers. European folk ethnography is closest to what we call folklore, and in folkloristic activity the students of English and other languages of civilization are more numerous than we. The result is that unless anthropologists specialize in primitive ethnography - which no one other than they seems to want to undertake - they share their specialty with collaborators in some natural science or in some humanity and are likely to be outnumbered by them.

What impulse drives anthropologists to participate in so many fields which [are] being cultivated by others? It seems to be a two-pronged impulse to conceive at once empirically and holistically. We constitute one of the smaller learned professions, but we aim to take in larger tracts of phenomena than any other discipline. Our total coverage must thus of necessity be somewhat thin. Yet it is rarely vague or abstruse - we start with concrete facts and we stay with them. Perhaps our coverage can be called spotty; though without implication of being random, irrelevant, disconnected. If a whole is steadily envisaged, the relation of its fragments can

become significant, provided the known parts are specific and are specifically located within the totality. At any rate, the holistic urge is what is most distinctive of us.

This is balanced by a love of fact, an attachment to phenomena in themselves, to perceiving them through our own senses. This taproot we share with the humanities. And we also tend strongly here toward the natural history approach. Sociologists have called us "nature lovers" and "bird watchers" and from their angle, the epithets stick. They have added another: "antiquarians." There are anthropological museums of tangible objects, but no sociological museums. We are strong on photographs, films, and tapes that reproduce sights and sounds. We write chapters on art in ethnographies and sometimes offer courses in primitive art. How many sociologists would venture that or even hanker to be venturing it? We insist on fieldwork as an opportunity, a privilege, and a professional cachet. We want the face-to-face experience with our subjects. The anonymity of the sociological questionnaire seems to us bloodless, even though its specificity and quantifiability are obvious assets to which we cannot easily attain by our methods.

To return to the other prong, the holism, this seems expressed also in our inclination to historical and to comparative treatment. American sociology is neither antihistorical nor anticomparative in principle; but it is primarily interested in the here and now, in our own culture more often than in foreign, remote, or past ones. Sociology began with a marked ameliorative bent, and with concern for practical matters of utility. Anthropology commenced rather with an interest in the exotic and useless. We did not constitute our Society for Applied Anthropology until 1941. The "action research" of World War II was largely thrust upon us by government and military, and by some it is remembered largely as a sort of spree of forced decision-making on grossly inadequate information.

It is significant that the sharing of anthropological fields is with the natural sciences (including psychology) and with the humanities. The only active overlap with any social science is that on theory with sociology, with which we also share some interest in demography. Specific primitive ethnography and perhaps most of the community studies in civilized societies continue to be done by anthropologists, but quantifiable studies of problems in civilized countries by sociologists. The latter tend to define terms more sharply and problems more limitedly. They probably rank next to economists and psychologists in abundance of statistical treatment. We still tend to shy at statistics.

Balancing our agreement on sociocultural theory, there exists a strong drift in sociology to emphasize social structure and social action as compared with cultural product or pattern, and to treat the cultural accompaniments as implicit, contained in, or derivative from the social structure. Anthropologists have contrariwise emphasized culture as their special concern. To be sure they have made almost a fetish of the social feature of kinship. But they tend to look upon society as one part of the total domain of culture, on which one can specialize or not as one can specialize on religion or art or values, or again on subsistence or technology or economic life. This procedure works to give consistent results, much as the contrasting sociological assumption and procedures yield effective results in their hands.

I have said that primitive ethnography is the only field in anthropology which no one else wants to share with us. It is also the field for which it has been notoriously most difficult to secure research funds from foundations and academic sources. Our other unique propensity in social science is our holism. The two peculiarities may be connected. I owe to Walter Goldschmidt the suggestion that our early and continued holistic proclivities are derivative from

concern with primitive peoples, and that this led also to our emphasis on cultural relativism. Interest in one's self and appanages can never be wholly discarded, but it tends to extend itself outward slowly. Once there exists genuine curiosity about the peripheries, these, in conjunction with the ever-present center, imply an interest in the relation of the two foci, and in the whole which the foci encompass or indicate. The history of the origin of grammar in the Mediterranean world illustrates the involved mechanism. The Greeks developed for themselves, by reasoning more than by substantive analysis, some rudimentary principles of Greek grammar. But the full structure became recognized only after Alexander's conquest, when Hellenized Cilicians and Thracians were able to view Greek in comparison and contrast to their "barbarous" mother tongues. Much so, the past and contemporary anthropological readiness to deal with the remote, the exotic, even the illiterate and deprived, seems to have led to and promoted holistic approaches and relativistic thinking.

As for relativism, I accept the criticism sometimes made, that as a final and summating principle it is sterile and a renunciation, as indeed any terminal thinking must be. But as a validated assumption serving as the basis for further inquiry, relativism is both indispensable and productive.

Since personalities are initially determined by their ancestry, it is a relevant fact, if I am right, that anthropology was originally not a social science at all. Its father was natural science; its mother, esthetically tinged humanities. Both parents want to attain reasoned and generalized conclusions; but they both also want to reach them by way of their senses as well as by reasoning. After a brief first childlike decade or two of outright speculation, anthropology settled down to starting directly from experienced phenomena, with a bare minimum of ready-made abstraction and theory, but with a glowing conviction that it was entering new territory and making discovery. Its discovery was the world of culture, an enormous product and a vast influence, with forms and patterns of its own, as a validating principle: relativity. There were far boundaries to this demesne, which included our own and the most remote and diverse human productivities. The vision was wide, charged, and stirring. It may perhaps fairly be called romantic: certainly it emerged historically at the time when esthetic romanticism was intellectualizing. The pursuit of anthropology must often have seemed strange and useless to many people, but no one has ever called it an arid or a toneless or a dismal science.

Now, maturity has stolen upon us. The times and utilitarianism have caught up with us, and we find ourselves assigned to the social sciences. It is a dimmer atmosphere, with the smog of jargon sometimes hanging heavy. Generalizations no longer suffice; we are taught to worship Abstraction; sharp sensory outlines have melted into logicoverbal ones. As our daily bread, we invent hypotheses in order to test them, as we are told is the practice of the high tribe of physicists. If at times some of you, like myself, feel somewhat ill at ease in the house of social science, do not wonder: we are changelings therein; our true paternity lies elsewhere.

I do not end on a note of despondency; for the routes of fulfillment are many. And specifically, it is well that with all their differences of habitus, of attitude, of kinds of building stones, sociology and anthropology have merged with a substantially common basic theory. That should be an encouragement to both, and a rallying point to to others. And it will serve as a foundation for all the social sciences to build on.